



Parenting in the Age of Anxiety

By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay:

I am a grandmother of five and raised four children myself. While I try not to interfere with how my children raise *their* children, it's getting hard to bite my tongue. It seems my grandchildren can hardly breathe without my children consulting an expert.

While I understand that my generation was not "in the know," and did some things wrong, we had our kids out of diapers, taught them manners and made them eat their vegetables! I also think we expected bumps and bruises along the way.

Why are parents today so overly anxious?



Illustration By Jana Christy

Dear Grandparent:

I do think you are right about many privileged and hurried families today. Overly anxious parenting is born out of stress, fear and the need for control.

Ask parents the purpose of parenting today and watch their faces go blank. Press a bit harder, and they want just what previous generations have wanted – for their kids to be responsible and capable.

We parent our children to survive and thrive in the world in which we live. We are not parenting to

create entitled, demanding children who expect instant gratification. The trick is not to give in to the immediate need to make kids "happy" while losing mindfulness about our long-term goals.

While our children are brighter than ever and have access to greater resources, there seems to be less downtime for parents to think and less room for error, leaving parents feeling impatient and anxious about their child's every imperfection.

Children have much more voice these days. We are raising "little lawyers" with our "let's make a deal" style of parenting. With sufficient reasoning

skills, children can talk their parents into just about anything.

In addition, parents have raised the bar regarding standards for achievement. Children are expected to perform and be outstanding. In this manner, parents may lose perspective on how development is varied and how it takes place in fits and starts over time.

Parenting is bigger than we are. Many outside factors influence how we parent. Today's parents face very different challenges than previous generations. For example, children can no longer run around outside with a sense of freedom, nor can they always solve their own problems without adults intervening.

Much information from the media is more sensational than factual. Parents receive distorted perceptions about the dangers their children face, resulting in overly anxious and reactive, fear-based parenting.

Many children are growing up indoors in a digital world. Teenagers have a social world in cyberspace with little or no need to face and greet a parent. You may not even meet most of your teen's friends in high school.

It is impossible to look to our elders for guidance or to rely on how we were raised when the

ent. There are too many authorities with too many opinions, making it hard for parents to have confidence in their own judgment. They are looking for easy answers and a "fix it" approach, leaving them angry and anxious.

Finally, with respect to factors that contribute to overly anxious parenting, ask parents today

whether they have time to meet alone as a couple – even once a week – to discuss what is or is not working in the household, in order to be reflective and make sound parenting decisions. They will laugh and confess there is no time to think, communicate or even have a date.

Here are a few reminders to help your children parent with greater confidence and with greater ability to let go:

- Children need clear, confident boundaries and rules in order to thrive.
- Step back and try to see your child for who she is, rather than what you expect or need her to be.

Today's parents face very different challenges than previous generations. For example, children can no longer run around outside with a sense of freedom, nor can they always solve their own problems without adults intervening.

challenges we face are so entirely different. Parents may be working more, with less emotional and social support for themselves. While it "takes a village," there may be no village. This can also make parents highly anxious.

Parents complain that they are experiencing "information overload" with respect to how to par-

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Is Your Child Worried, Clingy, Irritable or Frustrated?

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• Ask yourself what you are afraid of and why you cannot tolerate allowing your child to learn from her mistakes.

• Remember that children thrive on rules and respect adults who can set up expectations with confidence.

• Avoid overly reactive and dramatic parenting, which creates doubt and anxiety.

including academic and social.

• Stop making excuses to indulge your children, despite their special needs. The goal is always to encourage our children to persevere and sail on their strengths, regardless of their own shortcomings or those of others.

• Your child's behavior is not always about you or a reflection of

Have faith that children grow up, despite and because of the imperfections in you, in themselves and in the world around them.

• Resort to less scolding and lecturing. Try asking questions in order to encourage your school-age child to think and solve her own problems.

• Leave conflicts for your child to solve.

• Remember that there is a learning opportunity in every situation, not a perfect outcome.

• Anxiety breeds anxiety. Children are affected by our emotions and will worry when we worry. Take responsibility for your own tendency to be overly anxious.

• Where possible, take the drama out of parenting. Being genuine and caring is good. Being dramatic and overly reactive usually backfires and engenders opposition.

• Do your thinking and reasoning with your partner, not with your child.

• Ask yourselves if your own life was perfectly linear and what is your worst fear for your child? Don't let fears rule your parenting.

• Make sure you "have a life," so you can distance yourself a bit and put parenting in perspective. Find ways to let go and distance. Let others influence your children and try to trust that this is a healthy thing.

• Let your children practice gradual independence in all areas,

you. With less guilt and shame, it is easier to parent with confidence.

It is tough to be practical and sensible in our overly comfortable, achievement-oriented world. It is tough to have confidence and to parent calmly when we feel hurried, a bit isolated and overwhelmed. What parents need today is more time to think and get clear, in order to cultivate greater trust in their own judgment.

Find ways to accept your children for who they are and give them time to grow up. Be aware of your own fears and recognize where you do – and do not – have control.

We set the rules and the bar for behavior in order to hold our children and guide them. Then we create distance. We separate in order to provide enough space, within the guidelines, so they can practice growing up. Have faith that children grow up, despite and because of the imperfections in you, in themselves and in the world around them.

Kay Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Her "Parenting With Confidence" Coffeehouse meets on the fourth Thursday of each month at Congregation Beth El. For more information, visit her website www.kayabrams.com.

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